

Testimony
of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association

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by

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Thank you Chairman Markosek and Chairman Geist and members of the House Transportation Committee for inviting me here today to discuss these four bills which are of interest to my colleagues and important to the safety of the children that we transport to and from school and other activities on a daily basis. My name is Diane Romeo and I am here representing the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA). While PSEA represents educators throughout the state, it also includes almost 34,000 Education Support Professionals (ESP) which includes secretaries, classroom aides, custodians, paraprofessionals, and bus drivers. Today, I am speaking on behalf of PSEA's 2,300 school bus drivers and the students for whom we are responsible.

I have just started my twenty-first year as a bus driver for the Pocono Mountain School District in Monroe County. I am proud to say that during this time I have remained "Accident Free". I have driven 84 & 72 passenger buses and have well exceeded more than half a million miles in my career. Currently, I am driving a 42 passenger bus covering almost 200 miles each day. My morning typically begins at 5 a.m., when I report to the transportation campus, although during inclement weather I must arrive earlier to defrost and clean my bus for the safety of my students and others on the road. My day ends anywhere between 5 p.m. at the earliest, to 7 p.m. or even later if I am transporting students to and from sporting events.

I take pride in my work and my responsibility for student safety seriously. To this end, I serve as a member of the Safety Team in my school district. As a member of this group, I am responsible for making presentations in all of our seven elementary schools informing students and staff of our "School Bus Safety Program" each September and October.

In addition to holding a CDL license, I also have been a Certified Commercial Driver License Instructor and Trainer for more than eight years, which means I am qualified to train and license new bus drivers. This license permits me to provide the mandatory 14 (usually 17 ½) hours of classroom instruction as well as the six hour minimum, although many complete 15-20 hours, of the On-The-Road and Behind the Wheel Training required by the State of Pennsylvania in order to operate a school bus.

According to Dr. Cal LeMon (author of *Unreported Miracles: What you Probably Do Not Know About Your Child's School Bus*), "It's 87 times safer for your child to take a school bus than to drive them yourself, let them ride with friends, or even walk or ride a bicycle." On the national level, every year, our nation's 450,000 public school buses travel more than 4.3 billion miles to transport 23.5 million children to and from school and school-related activities.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration provides the following facts:

- Ninety-six percent of the injuries to the estimated 8,500 to 12,000 student injured annually in school bus accidents are considered minor. These are injuries such as bruises and scrapes.
- Four percent of the injuries are considered serious. These consist of between 350 to 475 injuries annually.
- Six students die annually from injuries sustained in a school bus. In contrast, approximately 600 students die annually in accidents when riding to and from school in other motor vehicles.

- Approximately 16 students annually are fatally injured from accidents occurring when they are pedestrians in the loading and unloading area of the school bus.

Pennsylvania Department of Transportation statistics indicate that there are over 1.5 million students riding school buses daily. In 2005, there were 602 injuries in 497 crashes involving a school bus. Five of these incidents resulted in fatalities; three were drivers of other vehicles and two were pedestrians. One pedestrian was a student.

While these statistics demonstrate that school bus transportation is, indeed, safe, there always is room for improvement. I believe that the legislation being considered here today will help to further reduce the number of school bus related accidents and provide for greater student safety, if enacted. I thank the sponsors of these bills for their leadership in this area along with the members of this committee for their consideration.

House Bill 216, introduced by Representative Cohen, would require an automatic fire suppression system in every school bus. According to a report prepared for the National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB) Public Hearing on Motorcoach Fires in 2006, there was an annual average of 2,210 bus or school bus fires between 1999 and 2003 with an average of six per day. They caused an annual average of three deaths and 30 injuries. Unfortunately, the report does not separate regular buses from school buses so that we could get a more accurate number as it relates to school buses. This technology could prove invaluable, particularly in vehicles that transport special needs students, who require substantial assistance to load and unload a vehicle. While PSEA supports this bill, we would request that funding be allocated to the school districts to pay for this important technology.

House Bill 216 is also important when viewed in conjunction with House Bill 1793 sponsored by Representative Galloway. This bill would prohibit school buses from being operated beyond the end of the twelfth year from the date of manufacture or the end of the school year whichever is later. Every year, new advances are being made which make school buses safer. According to the NTSB report, 92% of the fires in buses and school buses in 2003 (in which the model was known) occurred in models from 2000 or earlier. While PSEA supports the concept of House Bill 1793, we request that the penalty only be assigned against the employer. We believe that it is unfair to put the school bus driver in the middle of either breaking the law or facing insubordination charges.

PSEA also supports House Bill 247 sponsored by Representative Godshall, which would establish a pilot program providing for the automated enforcement of those who fail to stop for a school bus. The vast majority of injuries and deaths occur outside of the school bus. As a bus driver, I have seen many incidents of drivers who pass me when I have the eight-way light system on as required by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in the bus drivers training manual. There is no way that they are able to see the children who are in front of the bus. Unfortunately, many of the younger students do not look before walking out from the protection of the bus. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, there were 943 convictions in 2005 for passing a stopped school bus. House Bill 247 has the potential of curbing this number, if drivers were aware that the automated enforcement system was in effect.

While PSEA supports House Bill 1183, sponsored by Representative Keller, the use of mobile phones while operating a school bus is very rare. Most school districts already prohibit their use.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify on the issue of how to better protect our children while transporting them to and from school. I would also like to take this opportunity to ask each of you to see how safe our buses are by riding in one of them back in your school districts.

I look forward to any questions you may have.